

**TOWN OF DARIEN
PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 2009**

ATTENDANCE: Jane Branigan, Chairman; Susan Daly; Andy Hunter;
Bob Marchesi; Marianne Gutierrez

STAFF: Susan Swiatek, Director

OTHER: Guy Wisinski, Chairman Lights Committee, DJFL; Dick Albu, President DJFL;
John van der Kieft; Brian Park; Michael Savino; Cheryl Russell;
Jane Wolcott; John Wolcott; Frank Albrizio; Don Loomis; Steve Yurman

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Branigan called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. She explained that they were having a courtesy meeting to discuss the lighting of Holahan Field. She said Mr. Wisinski, who is the Chairman of the Lights Committee of the Darien Junior Football League, will make his presentation. The Commission members will then discuss the matter among themselves. She said that this is not to grant permission to put the lights on the field; that would be the Planning & Zoning Commission's responsibility. This is to grant or deny permission to the Darien Junior Football League to make application to the Planning & Zoning Commission.

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These comments have been summarized and are not to be considered verbatim.

Mr. Wisinski said he has been a Darien resident for 20 years, and he has been a coach for DJFL for 8 years. He said that Darien is doing very well with participation in sports. DJFL has over 400 kids enrolled in the program. The shortfall that DJFL has is the time in late fall, shortly before or after Daylight Savings Time, when they don't have a place to practice, and it then becomes a safety issue. He said that he has called ambulances four times in eight years, which was a direct result of lack of lights. He said that last year, there was a pilot program with the high school, and they worked with the neighbors, who were very understanding of the situation. He said that fields at the high school don't always have to be used; he referenced points highlighted in the Town Plan with the Parks & Recreation Commission. The equipment is stored at the Town Hall field, so they were looking to work with the neighborhood and the Parks & Recreation Commission to come up with a solution to have a safe practice facility for the kids. They are asking to re-create the light that would be there right before Daylight Savings Time, or dusk. The coaches involved in the program are all volunteers who can't arrive before 6:00 p.m. because they all work in NYC.

The proposal would be to have three portable units from United Rentals. He explained that he and Mr. Steeger investigated the possibility of electricity to run lights. However, power is not available.

He gave a slide show presentation of the DJFL.

The Goals and Benefits of the Pilot Program –

To provide a safe environment for the DJFL football program for their practices from October 19th through November 16th; and

To replicate the field availability that is the norm during the first two months of the football season.

The Benefits –

Improved practice conditions that lead to reduced risk of injury;

Extended effective use of the entire town hall grass field to support more than one team practicing; and

Minimized impact to DHS neighborhood, as an additional field would be used.

The Summary of the Pilot Program is –

Add three lights towers (similar to those used this past year at DHS) to light the grass field behind the baseball diamond (the field traditionally used by the DJFL for practices).

Lights limited to weekday practices on Monday-Friday only. No games and no weekend light usage.

Lights would be removed Saturday morning in order not to interfere with field usage for Babe Ruth baseball.

Lights on at 5 p.m. and off by 7:30 p.m. on all evenings lights are used.

Proposed light posts conform to P&Z ordinances – 20 ft. maximum height.

Darien youth sports to pay for the pilot program including: Rental Cost, Maintenance, Insurance, Operating Costs.

Lights positioned at North sides of field pointing towards Town Hall building and away from all residential neighborhoods.

Program runs until the last DJFL team is eliminated from playoffs (no later than November 13th).

Background on the Lack of Natural Sunlight –

As each week passes in the fall, the natural daylight available to conduct practice decreases substantially, making it difficult to run appropriate and effective practices.

Sunset in early September is 7:30 p.m.; sunset in early October is 6:30 p.m.; sunset in late October is 6:00 p.m; and sunset in early November (after Daylight Savings time) is 4:30 p.m.

Therefore, all sports programs in town lose 3 hours of practice time by the end of their fall season.

Major Considerations –

Use of lights will only be operated by Board members of the DJFL and United Rental engineers.

Minimal disruption to the neighborhood as the practice times at the beginning of the season currently run to 7:30 p.m.

Proposal helps the DJFL head and assistant coaches whom work in NYC as they are unable to hold practices at 4 p.m. when the daylight decreases.

Commitment being requested is short term as it will last for only four weeks.

Mr. Wisinski then discussed the next page of the presentation which described the portable lights, and said that there is a huge potential for an accident to occur without the proper lighting when parents pick up kids after practice. As there is a lack of light in the parking lot, the portable lights would provide more light to avoid safety issues/potential accidents. He then discussed the last page of the presentation, describing the proposed location of the portable lights. He said that the lights would be placed on the far side of the field, to minimize noise and the light going towards homes. One would be in the far corner, partially shaded by trees, and one would be in the middle. The towers would be 20 ft tall.

Mr. Wisinski said they are trying to work with the Board of Education and the high school to piggyback off a program they have which would allow, taking into account Title 9, different sports using it and DJFL requesting any overflow time to use between 7:00 and 7:30 p.m.

Parks & Recreation board members then asked questions.

Ms. Branigan asked if Mr. Wisinski was proposing to change the lights in the parking lot. Mr. Wisinski said no, but that the lights would enhance the parking lot. Ms. Branigan said it wasn't under the Parks & Rec's jurisdiction, and he would have to go to P&Z for approval. Ms. Branigan asked how loud the noise is from the generators. Mr. Wisinski said that the units were tested last year and there is some difference of opinion as to how much noise is generated. He said the decibels on the proposed units are as low as the ones currently on the market. The proposed units and generators are quieter than ones from 5 years ago. Ms. Branigan expressed concern that the leaves will be down in late Fall, therefore leaving the surrounding houses exposed to more noise and light; and she expressed concern for the wear and tear on the field from the portable light units and generators. Mr. Wisinski said the portable light units are on wheels that are on plywood, and would not create wear and tear on the field. Ms. Branigan asked if DJFL was able to use the lights at the high school last year. Mr. Wisinski said there were two days that they used the lights, until 7:30 p.m. He said he started asking the Board of Education in January if DJFL could use the lights. Mr. Albu, President of the DJFL, clarified for Ms. Branigan that DJFL was given permission to use the high school field a few nights. Ms. Branigan asked if DJFL was the only volunteer sports team to not start practices after school. Mr. Wisinski said that other sports groups use professional, paid coaches and they can practice earlier. Mr. Wisinski made a point that lacrosse and other sports teams practice and play in the spring, where natural light is not an issue. Mr. Albu said that DJFL also uses Tokeneke and Holmes school, but there are no lights used there. There is no approval for lights at the high school this year. Mr. Albu said their schedule allows the use of the field from 6:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. and they will use the schedule as long as they can, light permitting, but will move the starting time back from 5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. and go right until dusk. The portable light proposal would allow them to have an extra 2-4 weeks of practice time, depending on how many teams go to the championship. It is possible the season could end before November 13. The request for the portable lights is not anything different than what they are using currently; it is just a request to extend practice time until the end of the season.

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Ms. Swiatek asked if DJFL plans on bringing the teams from the elementary school to the Town Hall field if the proposal goes through. She was concerned about the impact on the field, and if damage had occurred, the Parks & Recreation Commission's crews would not have time to repair the field before winter approached. Therefore, the field would not be ready for spring use. Mr. Albu said that they are allowed only 6 hours per week for practice, and by the end of the season it could be reduced to 4 hours per week. He said that it could be possible that the teams are brought to the Town Hall field, but they would be separated out and the fields would be managed by DJFL. Mr. Wisinski said that DJFL will be using the turf field at the high school as long as the light allows. Ms. Swiatek asked when the regular season ends. Mr. Albu said that it ends on October 31, 2009, and the first week after that, all teams are in the playoffs. The second week after that there are two teams in the playoffs.

Mr. Hunter asked if DJFL uses the lower field. Mr. Wisinski said that soccer uses that field.

Ms. Daly asked how far the lights would project out. Mr. Wisinski explained that the lights could be positioned anywhere, and he was open to any options.

Ms. Gutierrez asked if the other school fields are used for the non-tackle teams. Mr. Albu said that the league is growing quickly, and they are putting the 3rd & 4th graders are going to practice on the Tokeneke and Holmes fields, and the older kids will be at the Town Hall field.

Ms. Swiatek asked how far the distance of the light would be. Mr. Wisinski said it depends on how the lights are angled, that if they are pointed down, it's less light; if they are pointed out, it's more light. He said there would be a glow into the parking lot if the lights are put at the end of the field.

Mr. Marchesi confirmed that practices are held on Friday nights. Mr. Wisinski said that Friday nights are the biggest nights, and games are played on Saturdays.

Mr. Wisinski offered to have United Rentals come to Town Hall field to demonstrate the portable light towers.

Mr. John van der Kieft, 75 Hanson Road, said it should be clear to the Parks & Rec Commission that the use of lights at the high school is still in the test stage. The test last year had to allow for the neighbors to agree, as the high school was in contention for the State championships. Some parameters were put together by the high school and DJFL. The noise was bothersome, and there was a reflection problem. The Board of Education is currently looking at a plan that would allow use of the field for high school varsity sports only. The high school is putting together a package, after feedback from the neighbors, to present to P&Z. Ms. Branigan confirmed that the application will be made in the Fall. Mr. Wisinski said at the last Board of Education meeting, they would present their plan to the high school. DJFL would also have a separate application that would go along with that to P&Z to allow DJFL to use the field after the varsity team, and/or high school team, used it.

Mr. Brian Park, 39 Park Place, asked if they had considered using other locations, like Cherry Lawn Park and Baker Field. Mr. Wisinski said that P&Z had suggested they use Town Hall field because the equipment is stored here and they have most kids practicing here. Mr. Park said that it appears that Cherry Lawn Park is isolated and potentially underused. Mr. Park asked if the plan was approved here, would that mean DJFL could use the lights anywhere. Mr. Wisinski said the application is for one year only. DJFL would have to re-apply each year. Mr. Park spoke about the safety concern, saying that with the cars leaving, are they not transferring

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the risk of injury or accident to a later time of night. Mr. Wisinski said it's possible he misstated that information; he said that practice is from 6:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m., with all practices getting out at the same time. He said that the light coming towards the parking lot would be helpful.

Mr. Michael Savino, 7 Renshaw Road, said he had the same concerns as were brought up earlier. Mr. Wisinski said that all the teams need fields, and he offered to have United Rentals bring in the three portable light units for people to see. He said there is an impact study on-line, and it was done by professionals. Mr. Savino asked the Board to consider shortening the times of practices, after the Daylight Savings Time change, which is in early November. Mr. Wisinski said he would be receptive to that.

Ms. Jane Wolcott, 36 Fitch Avenue, said she has lived behind the high school field for over 3 years. She said the survey at the high school was done in the Fall of 2006. She mentioned that there are several fields in town that are empty between 4:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. She said her experience with living behind the high school has been listening to grinding machinery and seeing blinding light. There is a bowl-like effect. The grinding noise rattles her kitchen. If this proposal is approved, the neighbors should be aware of the effects of the lights, which resemble a UFO landing sight. She said that people own their properties, work hard to keep them, and they should be able to come home and enjoy their homes at night. She said that the pictures provided do not tell the real story, nor does the description of the noise level.

Mr. Frank Albrizio, 1 St. John's Place, said that football is a game of emotions, and with the use of lights, the kids will get even more worked up. He mentioned the noise of the cleats on the street as the players go to and from their cars and the field. This is not a great place to have lights. The generators are noisy during the dinner hour, and diesel takes a lot of effort to get started, especially in the colder weather. Mr. Albrizio was concerned that it would detract from house prices. He said the noise has gotten louder each year as coaches have gotten more involved. Mr. Albu said team spirit is encouraged at the end of the practices. He welcomed everyone to review the study that is available, and to make their judgment after they review it. Mr. Wisinski said the Town invested money in a test study done by professionals. He said that everyone has an opinion, but there are also the facts to consider.

Mr. Don Loomis, 9 Cherry Street, said he lives close to Mr. Albrizio. He felt it was great that kids are involved. He felt the issue for him revolves around noise. He said it would be more beneficial to have the neighbors see and hear the light towers firsthand, rather than reading the numbers off a page or reading a report.

Mr. John Wolcott, 36 Fitch Avenue, said he wished to refer the Board members to the application for this year, which was written by Superintendent Don Fital on July 22, 2009. He quoted the application: "The report concluded the results of the pilot project last year were mixed. The greatest benefit was experienced by the football team in preparing for late season competition. On the negative side, it was determined that if any future use was proposed, certain factors would need to be improved upon. The factors are:

1. Droning noise produced by diesel generators, which reverberated against the house and turned the house into speakers. Mr. Wolcott said they couldn't hear themselves think inside of their own house due to the noise.
2. The aiming of lights to reduce spillage. P&Z requires that the lights don't impact anyone. Aiming the lights differently will not solve the problem. Mr. Wolcott said that while Mr. Wisinski made a good presentation and the pictures were the best images he could get, the camera can't pick up a ray of light the same way the human eye can.

3. Concerns over diesel exhaust. Mr. Wolcott suggested that everyone read the generator's owner's manual. He quoted the following: California Proposition 65 warning: "Diesel engine exhaust and some of its constituents are known to the State of California to cause cancer, birth defects and other reproductive harm."

Mr. Brian Park noted some contradictory information, saying that it was mentioned practices would end at the same time, at sundown, but with the use of the lights, practice would end later. He said his issue is with the safety of the neighborhood, and suggested a stop sign be put at the corner of Park and Fitch to slow traffic coming into the neighborhood. He said Mr. Wisinski had mentioned earlier that there was a safety issue in the parking lot at pick-up time, but now the cars would be racing through the neighborhood later at night due to the lights being on later.

Mr. Steve Yurman, 29 Cherry Street, said he is basically a supporter of sports and likes what DJFL has done in the past 8 years. He said there is a history of flooding on Cherry Street. He explained that one house is slated to be torn down, and several others have been or will be raised to avoid flooding. He said that 4 houses are empty, they can't rent or sell them, and the Town has a plan which is 5-10 years away. He said that the electricity option should be explored for house #3 and maybe house #2. The issue is with house #1, which the Town uses as access to the field. He said Cherry Street is very narrow, with cars parked on both sides, and traffic is normally a mess. He suggested that parking restrictions be put on Cherry Street if the proposal goes through. He now lives in Redding, CT across the street from an assisted living facility with the same light reflection problem. They planted 20-22 foot pine trees to shield the light from the neighbors to help alleviate the problem. He thought it was a good idea to have the portable lights brought in for the neighbors to see.

Ms. Cheryl Russell, RTM member, asked if 3rd graders play until 7:30 p.m. Mr. Wisinski said yes. She confirmed that DJFL would assume the responsibility of the maintenance for the generators. She asked if DJFL would ever consider paying their coaches. Mr. Albu said that they wouldn't be interested in that, because it makes better use of their resources if they pay for equipment and materials for the kids. Also, the fathers are the coaches, and it is a great experience. She asked if DJFL would ask the Board of Education to put lights on other fields. Mr. Albu said no, but if the residents were interested in that, DJFL would be receptive to it. She said that the meetings at Town Hall start at 7:30 p.m. and to arrive early, at 7:00 p.m. to get a parking space in the back, she said the traffic is heavy and dangerous. She didn't understand how the lights could reach that far to the parking lot to improve the safety issue. Mr. Wisinski said the safety issue is mainly for the kids to play on the field without hitting each other. The lights will reach 100 yards, and it will help carry to the parking lot. She said that she lives by the high school, and it's important for the neighbors to know that the lights are loud. She suggested that Parks & Recreation have the lights go out by 7:00 p.m. for traffic and parking concerns. It would show them to be better neighbors, also. She thought that it was a lot to ask of the neighbors to keep the lights on until 7:30, especially on Friday nights. She also mentioned the possibility of having practices from Monday – Thursday nights.

Mr. Wolcott suggested that when the demonstration takes place, they do it at night, as sound carries, and then multiply it by 3 times to have the full effect. He also asked how much time the last team practicing at the end of the season needs, and can't they get their full practice in by sundown. Mr. Wisinski said that at that time of the year, it's dark by 4:30, and many of the kids can't get there until 5:00 p.m. He said he was willing to do practices from 5:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m., which would be better than not having practice at all. Mr. Albu said if there was only one team in the playoffs, the issue isn't as severe as if there were five teams in the playoffs. He said if there was only one team practicing at the end of the season, it would only be for 1 or 2 nights a week.

Some discussion then took place among the Board members about the proposal and procedures involved. The neighbors need to be notified of the potential test date, and Ms. Swiatek said it has to be coordinated with her office to avoid conflicts with the schedule.

**** MS. DALY MOVED TO APPROVE THE DARIEN JUNIOR FOOTBALL LEAGUE (DJFL) TO BEGIN THE APPLICATION PROCESS TO THE PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION, FOR THE LIGHTING OF HOLAHAN FIELD ON A TEMPORARY BASIS FOR A ONE YEAR TRIAL PENDING RESULTS OF A LIGHTING DEMONSTRATION. APPLICATION TO CONSIST OF MONDAY-FRIDAY, 5:30 P.M. – 7:15 P.M., FROM OCTOBER 19 TO NOVEMBER 16, 2009.**

**** MS. GUTIERREZ SECONDED.**

**** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carolyn Marr
Telesco Secretarial Services